

A Journey Shared: The United States & China

A JOURNEY SHARED: THE UNITED STATES & CHINA **200 Years of History**

ORIGINS TO THE END OF THE 19TH CENTURY

Chinese Subjects in the United States

The activities of U.S. traders, missionaries, and diplomats in China constituted only one part of the story of U.S.-China relations. Several hundred thousand Chinese subjects came to the United States, where their experiences both promoted and hindered the development of positive ties between the two countries.

Chinese migration to the United States began as a trickle, but quickly turned into a flood in the middle of the 19th century. The earliest recorded instance of Chinese travel to the United States was in 1785, when an American ship stranded Chinese sailors in Baltimore. The first five Chinese to study in the United States came in 1818; they were followed by a group of

three in 1847 and another group of five a few years later. But the real influx began with the discovery of gold in California in 1849, marking the beginning of the California Gold Rush, which created an economic boom that provided unprecedented opportunity for tens of thousands of people from all over the world. News of the Gold Rush filtered back to southeast China in the form of tales of Gold Mountain, where anyone could find wealth and prosperity. In fact, since most of the early arrivals came to San Francisco, they named the city Gold Mountain (*Jinshan*, or *Kan San* in their local

dialect); to this day, the city is still called “Old Gold Mountain” (*Jiujinshan*).

By 1869, more than 100,000 Chinese had settled in the United States, and perhaps twice as many more had come but later returned to China. All came as sojourners, intending only to stay for a short period, while they saved money to send back home to their families. In order to protect the interests of these

growing numbers of laborers and merchants, the Qing Government established its first legation in Washington in the late 1870s.

Travel across the Pacific, however, was arduous. The “coolie trade” in laborers was perhaps the most common means for assuring passage, but it was far from an ideal method. Chinese farmers were brought to holding pens in Chinese ports, sent across the Pacific Ocean in often appalling conditions, and then forced to work for

paltry wages, with little or no legal protection. As early as 1847, the U.S. Government objected to these abuses and attempted to prevent ships carrying unwilling Chinese laborers from entering U.S. ports. Unfortunately, U.S. citizens took advantage of loopholes in the law and dominated the coolie trade for 15 years. In 1862, the U.S. Congress adopted the Prohibition of Coolie Trade Act, banning U.S. citizens from any involvement in the trade. While these measures improved some conditions, they came too late to slow the early flow of Chinese or greatly ease their difficulties. Most Chinese arrived deeply in debt



Chinese fishermen mend their nets in California (LOC)

to the brokers who arranged their passage and usually found employment for them upon arrival.

Once they arrived in the United States, Chinese sojourners congregated in highly insular communities. A lack of cross-cultural knowledge and linguistic comprehension led the migrants to cluster together; in this they were no different than any of the other immigrant groups that came to America. By the 1860s, the migrants had formed an organization, the Chinese Consolidated Benevolence Association, or Six Companies (in Chinese, the *Zhonghua huiguan*), to represent their collective interests, mediate internal disputes, arrange public events, and control illegal activities such as prostitution, gambling, and opium use. This organization helped to facilitate the growth of enclaves known as Chinatowns, which became some of the most recognizable and historically significant districts of many U.S. cities.

Companies that sought to develop the western United States relied heavily on Chinese laborers to fill out their work force. U.S. businessmen such as Leland Stanford, president of the Central Pacific Railroad, saw definite advantages in using Chinese workers:

“As a class they are quiet, peaceable, patient, industrious and economical. Ready and apt to learn all the different kinds of work required in railroad building, they soon become as efficient as white laborers. More prudent and economical, they are contented with less wages.”

While Stanford found many characteristics worthy of respect in his Chinese employees, and his company used over 10,000 Chinese laborers to help build the first transcontinental railroad, but he did little to improve their working conditions or their wages. Chinese railway workers averaged \$30 a month and had to provide for their own room and board, whereas white workers made \$35 a month, plus food and housing. Over time, segments of white society turned against the Chinese, in part because



Immigrant Lue Gim Gong revolutionized the Florida citrus industry (Volusia County Historic Preservation Board)

the wages paid to Chinese workers depressed the labor market.

Chinese migrants faced rising opposition in California and elsewhere after the United States hit an economic downturn in the early 1870s. In order to increase their own job prospects, groups of white laborers formed the Workingman's Party in 1877, and called for the exclusion of Chinese from the United States. These nativist workers' groups soon joined with more influential leaders, ultimately including Leland



A lily vendor in Chinatown (LOC)

Stanford, and forced a Chinese exclusion act through Congress.

President Rutherford B. Hayes, mindful of American commitments under the Burlingame Treaty, vetoed the bill, but this did not stifle American workers' frustrations. In 1880, the two countries signed a new agreement that allowed the United States to regulate, but not exclude, Chinese immigration. Two years later, under the pretense of regulation—and in contravention of existing treaties—the U.S. Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which suspended Chinese immigration for 10 years, marking the beginning of 60 years of exclusion. Chinese diplomats objected strenuously to this legislation, but were unable to prevent its passage.

After the 1882 Exclusion Act, the tensions between Chinese immigrants and Americans (and some European immigrants) intensified, as exclusionist groups in the United States fanned racist fears of the “yellow peril.” In 1885, a mob of white workers brutally killed 28 Chinese miners in Rock Springs, Wyoming, sparking a wave of attacks throughout the northwest. In 1892, the Geary Act extended the prohibition on new immigration, stripped Chinese immigrants in the United States of some of their legal rights, and required that they carry registration cards. The Exclusion Laws threatened the survival of the communities of Chinese who were already in the United States. The Chinatowns became more isolated and inward-looking, and in some cases their populations declined in the absence of a fresh influx of migrants, particularly significant numbers of Chinese women.

Chinese migrants challenged the constitutionality of several exclusionary laws, including the Scott Act of 1888, which prohibited new immigration and denied exit and re-entry visas to Chinese, and the Geary Act of 1892. They also raised the banner of civil rights by questioning the constitutionality of the denial of U.S. citizenship for Chinese children born in the United States, and by attempting to guarantee due process for Chinese who were barred upon returning to the United States from a visit home. Despite the hardships and second-class legal status, Chinese immigrants continued to arrive in the United States.

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1. Investigate the immigrant Chinese during the Gold Rush in such towns as in Deadwood and Tombstone. Analyze the efforts of the Chinese to make a new life for themselves in the U.S.
2. Investigate the "Tongs." Who or what were they? What was their purpose?
3. In 1892, the Geary Act extended the prohibition on new immigration. What rights did the Chinese lose? Investigate the impact on the Chinese. ■